



Submission to the Senate Community Affairs References Committee

Inquiry into the worsening rental crisis in Australia

[Sweltering Cities](#) is an NGO that works directly with communities in hot suburbs and homes to advocate and campaign for more liveable, equitable and sustainable cities. Our work is at the intersection of health, inequality and climate change. We are a registered health-promotion charity with the ACNC, working across diverse communities since 2020.

In this inquiry submission we have included information about extreme heat impacts, sections of our Summer Survey report highlight on renters and specific proposals for addressing heatwave safety for renters. We have also included stories and comments from over thirty renters in different suburbs. We urge you to read these stories and act swiftly to protect our communities ahead of the coming deadly summer heat that we will all experience.

Extreme heat is a public health crisis that directly impacts many of our most vulnerable and marginalised communities. Heat impacts our physical and mental health. Some of the most vulnerable community members are older people, people with disabilities, young children and people living in low quality housing. Housing is a key issue because high home temperatures, and especially houses that stay hot overnight and don't provide nighttime relief, put a lot of stress on our bodies to maintain a safe internal temperature. There is also evidence that exposure to high temperatures results in an increase in miscarriages and stillbirths and other maternal and neonatal complications. We can prevent heat related diseases including dehydration, heat exhaustion, heat stress and heat stroke by establishing protective legislation that safeguards individuals who are living in unsafe hot homes.

We urge you to put in place the necessary measures to protect renters from baking in dangerously hot homes during the summer months. Heatwave events are predicted to become longer, hotter and more frequent. The Australian Government must proactively support all members of our community to prevent heatwave related injury and death in increasingly deadly summer heatwaves.

Renters in public, affordable or private housing are more likely to live in low energy efficiency homes with no insulation or air conditioning. They are facing extreme temperatures with limited power to improve their home thermal comfort. The [Sweltering Cities 2022 Summer Survey](#) found that 50% of renters were leaving their homes to go to cool safe spaces on hot days, compared to 15% of homeowners. The responses to our survey reveal the drastic measures that people are taking to keep cool in the heat due to the inadequacy of regulations when it comes to the conditions and standards of rental properties. At the bottom of this submission we have included the 'Highlight on Renters' section of the 2022 Summer Survey Report.

We ask the Australian Government to do right by renters and commit to reforming legislation to support vulnerable and marginalised people during heatwaves. We propose two



priorities that we believe are effective and achievable ways of reducing heatwave vulnerability for renters:

Make rental homes safe in extreme heat

By updating regulations, introducing higher energy efficiency standards and funding home upgrades we can reduce heat-related illnesses and deaths among renters.

Decrease financial pressure on renters

We must aim to reduce the financial pressure on renters that may lead to people choosing between cooling and buying food or medications, or people suffering in hot homes because they cannot afford to leave.

These two priorities can be actioned by a range of measures including:

Upgrading the minimum standards for rental properties to include cooling or safe temperature guidelines.

By including cooling as either guidelines for safe indoor temperatures, mandating mechanical cooling in the case of unsafe indoor temperatures, or adding 'for thermal efficiency purposes' to existing minimum standards such as blinds, we can ensure Victorian renters are safer at home during heatwaves. This measure should be designed to empower tenants to negotiate with their landlords to upgrade cooling systems or install features such as blinds, window seals and heat blocking curtains. Putting cooling or safe temperature guidelines into rental standards will reduce heat-related illnesses and heatwave deaths in our community.

Increasing energy efficiency standards to reduce energy bills.

Renters face expensive energy bills when trying to maintain safe and cool homes during summer. The cost of running air-conditioning has become a major financial struggle for many, making it incredibly challenging, if not impossible, to stay cool at home. In addition, low thermal efficiency homes pass the cost of living stress onto tenants, which in turn increases health costs as people are more likely to become sick with heat related illness. In 2022, Sustainability Victoria released a [report on cold homes](#), showing that thermal comfort and energy efficiency upgrades can reduce energy bills, improve indoor temperatures, lower healthcare costs and reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

Introducing insulation standards for rental homes.

Renters are footing the bill and facing the health impacts that are caused by the lack of insulation in their homes. Insulation standards will increase the energy efficiency of rental homes, cut power bills and help tenants maintain a safe temperature in their dwellings all year round. Insulation is an investment that will benefit current and future tenants and owners.



Updating regulations to ensure any cooling related maintenance requests (including air conditioners, windows, blinds and other repairs) are considered urgent and actioned within 24 hours.

Heatwaves are our deadliest environmental disaster and as such, all home repairs that prevent renters from keeping their homes safe and cool should be classified as urgent issues.

Sweltering Cities has collected the stories of Australian Renters who are living in hot homes and feeling the health impacts of rising temperatures. See stories from community members such as [Madeline](#), [Melissa](#) and [Alison](#) on our website and see below for more.

Community comments

The following comments were submitted to us by community members.

I am a renter in Melbourne and work as a mental health clinician at a public hospital in the Northern suburbs. When there are heat waves in the outer suburbs the number of presentations to our hospital goes up massively, along with the acuity and social problems. People with mental illness are often lower SES status, living in some of the worst quality rentals and homes going around. This is not fair, and can take years of people's lifespan, cause hundreds of unnecessary deaths and put enormous strain on the health system. Mandated energy efficiency standards, insulation is necessary to protect the most vulnerable people from future heat waves for everyone - but particularly those in the outer Northern suburbs where some of the highest rates of heat deaths occur.

Brunswick West

I live in an east facing rental apartment with floor to ceiling windows. I currently pay \$520 per month for rent and there is no cooling provided in the apartment, or sun blocking blinds. I have had to resort to buying windscreen sun shades to attach to the flimsy blinds provided by the owner. They did help to keep the flat a little cooler, but it meant I lived permanently in the dark throughout late spring to early Autumn

City of Melbourne

I know how lucky I am now to live in a well built, insulated and maintained home, because I know what it's like to suffer through summer in unhealthy rental homes. But decent living standards shouldn't be a matter of luck. Renters should expect them wherever and whenever they rent. And renters shouldn't be forced to pay 'premium' rents for basic amenities such as cooling that works, windows that open, window coverings that insulate and screen doors that ventilate. I've lived in rental homes with windows that wouldn't open because they were painted shut, or the frames were splintered and rotting, or the cheap chain-crank mechanisms were broken. And even when they did open, they'd only open a crack – not wide enough to air out the house properly when cool changes arrived.

I've lived in homes whose landlords refused to install screen doors because it would ruin the 'street appeal' of the 'period facade'. The way their investment looked from the outside mattered more to them than how liveable it was on the inside. Because of this, I've had to choose to risk



my security and my pets' safety, and fill the house with flies and mosquitoes, every time I opened the doors to cool the house down in summer. I've lived in homes with only cheap, flimsy metal venetian blinds to protect west-facing windows against blazing afternoon sun, and where landlords chose to cut down the trees that shaded my windows. I've rented in Victoria for 25 years and I've never lived in a rental property that had ceiling fans or air conditioning. I still don't, because cooling isn't a mandatory amenity in Victorian rental properties, even as climate change makes our summers hotter and longer-lasting. My last two homes didn't have heating, either – but I've seen how promptly landlords acted to install fixed heaters once they were legally required to do so.

Changing the minimum rental standards is the only proven way to protect renters, who currently shoulder all the health consequences of living in homes that transform from fridges to ovens. Renters also shoulder a grossly unequal share of the financial consequences of heatwaves. We spend our own money on portable cooling appliances and temporary window coverings to remediate the short-sighted penny-pinching of a landlord class who get tax breaks on their 'investments' while charging us rents that are drifting far above the CPI. The absolute least landlords can do is to offer amenities in their rental properties that are worth the rents they're asking. Housing quality is not a business expense to be minimised – it's a basic human right.

Carlton

I believe this is an issue of social justice - rental conditions are disproportionately determined by the preferences of landlords and rental agents, stripping tenants of the basic right to determining their own living conditions. This leads to renters languishing in conditions they get given with no agency over by an unbalanced system, be they excessive heat in summer or vacuous cold in colder seasons. Each rental I've lived in has been an experience of enduring these extremes while landlords and agents obfuscate issues, delay obvious solutions and refuse to acknowledge the lived experience which me & my housemates directly bear. Rental conditions must not be allowed to deteriorate to the detriment of tenants; landlords/tenants must take responsibility for renter wellbeing or renounce their right to determine the wellbeing of tenants.

Northcote

I currently live in a rental with no insulation, poor heating and cooling, and thin windows with rotting frames. The lack of insulation and air flow has resulted in a mould problem that we are still chasing up to get fixed, more than a year after the issue was first raised. In summer, the lack of insulation, poor light entry, and lack of fly screened windows mean we have to trade off between shutting the blinds and opening windows for airflow, allowing bugs to enter and preventing light, or keeping blinds open and windows shut, allowing light to enter and keeping the house muggy but bug-free. The lack of appropriate insulation makes cooling ineffective and inefficient, and is unaffordable and unsustainable.

Northcote

I've lived in my rental in Richmond, Melbourne for just over two years now. I've been a renter for almost 20 years, and likely will be for the next 20. My house is a very traditional weatherboard cottage. Some features are great – high ceilings, generous sized rooms, a garden out the back. Other features, not so great. The house has absolutely zero insulation in any of the walls or ceiling, there are big gaps under the front and back doors, and all the single-glazed windows are



poorly fitting and draughty. The roof sometimes leaks, and even part of the hallway collapsed earlier this year. I've had a temperature tracker in my bedroom for the last year and a half as part of the Renter Researchers project. This past winter, the average temp was only 11.8°, dropping down to a very chilly 7.8° at one point. The extremes in summer are even worse – it got up to 31.3° this summer, at 7:45pm (and the temperature that night only dropped below 30 just before midnight). Last summer, the average temp was 24.8 for the whole month, with a max of 30.9. The house heats up quickly, and then takes forever to cool down – I can literally feel the heat radiating up from the floor when I walk down the hallway to go to bed. These temperatures have a massive impact on me – physically and mentally. It's so hard to sleep when it's hot. When there's a heat wave I often resort to 'camping out' on the couch in my living room where I can at least cool down the room a little with the old and rickety aircon unit. Otherwise I'll do everything I can to try and keep cool in my bedroom – have two fans blowing directly on me, sleep under a damp sheet, freeze washcloths to put on my neck... the "hacks" go on and on. My whole day revolves around trying to work out how to escape the heat. After a lot of fighting, I **finally** got my landlord to replace the aged split system unit in my lounge room. The unit didn't meet the new minimum rental standards for heating, but that didn't seem to matter at all to the owner. The new unit is incredible - and uses one seventh of the power as the previous one. But I still don't use it that often, because without proper insulation it means any heating or cooling just goes straight out the roof or through the floor. Just legislating for installing heating or cooling in rentals isn't enough when the houses are poorly insulated and draughty.

Burnley

I have been in rentals since moving out of my family home at the age 17. As I have become more aware of my rights as a renter it has become clear that they skewed in favour of the landlord, at the expense of the individual renter. Particularly, the minimum rental standards have not been amended to match the forever changing climate... This has led to me passing many of the scorching hot summers and freezing cold winters in houses which are fundamentally ill equipped to deal with the temperatures. Rather than mandating the upkeep of houses to match these changing conditions, the human and financial consequences have been placed on the renter - who, in the current day and age having regard to the economic conditions of Australia, are already immensely struggling.

Clifton Hill

On campus accommodation at Monash has no air conditioning. Can become very dangerous at certain times of the year.

Rocherlea

As a renter living in a terribly inefficient older home, I am terrified of the predictions for an incredibly hot summer coming plus the thought of what the world hitting 1.5° soon will mean for temperatures in Melbourne. I expect we'll be seeing 50° before long. What scares me so much is that my body simply can't cope with heat. When it tops 38° by day and over 20° all night my energy is sapped and I'm left so exhausted that I can't work or play with my kids. I'm trying to draughtproof my rental home to seal the large gaps around the vast expanses of single glazing, but know that's not going to hold out the intensity of our summers to come. My family needs an insulated home so that the one air-con can run efficiently and actually keep more than just the one room cool. I urge the Victorian State Government to lift the minimum rental standards



immediately. Lifting standards will not only improve the quality of living for the growing proportion on renters, but will also help to reduce statewide emissions with more energy efficient homes. We can't wait for a devastating heatwave to get this done. Thank you.

Aberfeldie

I've lived in my unit for many years when it was leaky and uninsulated. Summer days were hard, but nights were terrible. Since then I've upgraded my unit and it's very comfortable summer and winter with minuscule electricity bills. The difference it made to my quality of life is huge, I'm flabbergasted we aren't rolling this out across all of our housing stock. Everybody should have an (insulated) roof over their heads.

Kingsville

I'm really fortunate to own my own place now but during my rental history I lived through quite the seasons. The house (although expensive) didn't meet standards when it came to keeping the heat / cool inside and during my years I experienced horrible scenarios and expensive bills. Renting really only benefits the landlords with little security and freedom for the renter.

East Melbourne

Renters, just like everyone else, feel the heat and cold and so landlords need to respect those who rent their properties and so ensure they are both insulated and cooled adequately - landlords who show respect for those who occupy their properties will have happy renters who respect the houses in which they are living.

Shepparton

There are lots of incentives for homeowners but we need more regulation and subsidies for landlords to insulate rentals and make heating and cooling more sustainable.

Highpoint City

Poorly insulated and cooled homes have been an ongoing issue as a young renter who cannot afford to be selective about which rental home to choose. This has been an ongoing issue throughout sweltering Melbourne summers, as many houses have not included any air conditioning at all leading to uncomfortably hot living conditions that prevent normal enjoyment of the home. Furthermore, in rentals which do have air conditioning, I have often been unable to justify the use given poorly insulated homes will not retain the temperature adequately. It would be beneficial for renters at risk of heat related issues to have cooling and insulation included in the minimum rental standards. This would have an added flow on effect as better insulation provides positives throughout all seasons.

Surrey Hills

I've rented before and had -no solar so expensive bills -no insulation so no way to reduce bills -no water tanks so no way to garden cheaply -gas, so no way to reduce my use of fossil fuels. I'd like to see all-electric homes as standard for new builds so that renting becomes a better quality house over time and bill subsidies by landlords so that renters don't have to pay the cost of landlords not insulating rental properties or providing basics like solar panels.

Highpoint City



As someone who has rented for several years, I can attest to the downsides of renting. One major con is the lack of control and stability I have over my living space. I often feel like I'm at the mercy of my landlord's decisions, whether it's sudden rent increases or restrictions on making changes to the property. This lack of control can be frustrating and make it challenging to truly feel at home. Unlike homeowners who build equity and benefit from property appreciation, I'm essentially throwing money away without the prospect of long-term financial gain. With the majority of houses not meeting cleanliness standards under \$500 a week, there's a certain sense of frustration that comes with renting as you can't attend to anything in the house either as it's the landlords property and often in past few houses there's missing A/C systems, heaters and owners personal belongings left at the house. The constant knowledge that I may have to move at the end of my lease can be stressful and disrupt any sense of stability or belonging. Overall, while renting offers some benefits, it can be a challenging and less fulfilling living situation in the long run.

Newport

It gets so incredibly hot in summer! We are lucky enough to have a fixed efficient split-system air conditioner that helps a lot but I know not everyone is lucky enough to have one of these.

Brunswick

Not just older properties, PICAL(Adult Learning Centre in COWES) tenant in brand new building, 1/3 size of previous(!), owned by Bass Coast Shire Council, contains busy Foodbank, high on north wall, no eaves, no shading, optical pyrometer showed 49degC on 27degC day. On Open Day, staff had said it was hot but, no worries, builders will come back to install blind. Obviously expected sunblock blind on outside of the window but when measured, blind fitted was privacy type, inside, matte black!!!! Shire is proud of Climate Emergency Declaration 2019. No solar PV on roof. So much care, so little responsibility.

Sunset Strip

Insulation is not sufficiently appreciated here. Aussie homes should be built like Canadian homes: extremely well insulated to withstand dangerous seasonal temperatures. It will make homes more liveable, decrease the use of aircon because homes will be able to better maintain their ambient temps, decrease the demand on the electricity grid during heat waves, and decrease the costs to households and the government alike.

Melbourne

There is nothing worse than having no real options to fight the heat in houses run down or poorly maintained that can't keep the heat out and have no or poor cooling options.

Surrey Hills

I've personally lived in multiple houses with no cooling. And have found it unbearable during the summer days, I've even had to resort to renting a hotel in order to gain access to cooling.

Coburg

There's limited ability to get solar on a rental roof.

Melbourne



I haven't asked for air con to be installed because I have a long rental history and I know it will either not happen or result in a rent hike in a few months which would mean I'd have to move, and also because the landlord has failed to respond to other urgent requests such as a running broken tap

3051

Legislated changes to enforce minimal standards that ensure rental homes are liveable in all seasons is essential. Housing and health are interconnected. It is astonishing that so many renters pay a substantial portion of their income for homes that are inhabitable, and have no control over improving them.

3055

I dread summer every year. I can warm up with more clothes, but it's very hard to cool down. Hot days at home leave me feeling helpless and miserable and trapped, and I really can't think straight. I try to stay elsewhere but can't always find somewhere to go. Even cooler days of 28 degrees means 30 degrees in my room and it really impacts my mental health and wellbeing.

3058

I would like to reiterate the impacts of heat on the vulnerable. I haven't approached my landlord about making our house more energy efficient because I feel that my housing is too unstable. I know that as someone who is employed and with savings, if I'm not having that conversation (despite being a staunch advocate for climate action), then I know that it's not safe for others less privileged to have that conversation with their landlords either.

3070

I am living in a rental property so no changes will be made to the property because my landlord won't spend money on the property and at the moment I can't move.

3084

Our house is very drafty. The heat (and cold) transfer very quickly through the single glazing and gaps in doors/windows. I doubt the insulation (if any) is up to current standards. There should be stricter laws for landlords to maintain thermally sound properties.

3145

Rental homes are particularly big issues. I'm lucky in my current place, but I have previously had serious health issues due to the design of the property and its inability to be cooled with what was available. Sometimes even when air-conditioning is available, it is only in the living room; this usually means that the bedrooms get too hot to sleep in. Over a multi day heatwave, this is incredibly dangerous. Landlords should have standards they have to meet for cooling in summer.

3161

2022 Summer Survey Report

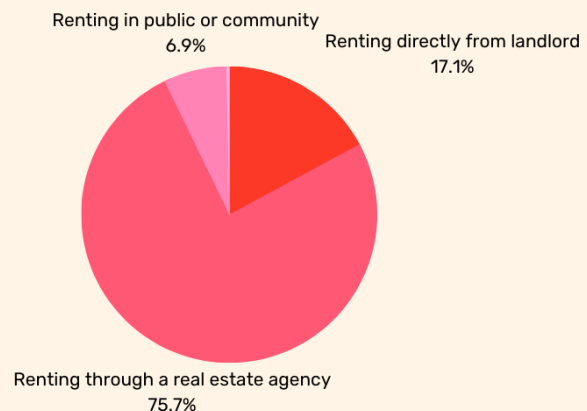
Highlight on Renters

47% of survey respondents were renters, with more than 92% of renters renting their home privately, as shown in the figure to the right.

Rental homes are often less energy efficient, and the people who rent them have less access to effective cooling options such as ceiling fans and air conditioning. There are currently no explicit requirements in any Australian jurisdictions for cooling in rental homes. As such, temperatures in rental homes are routinely above safe limits which creates unhealthy conditions.

Renters indicated that there are changes that can be made to improve their homes. Respondents would commonly suggest insulation, air conditioning, ceiling fans, double glazed windows, or window coverings as features that would improve heat resilience in their homes.

When asked if they had requested any of these changes, 328 renters indicated they had made requests, but only 48 of those requests were carried out. That is, only 15% of requests for improvements were successful.

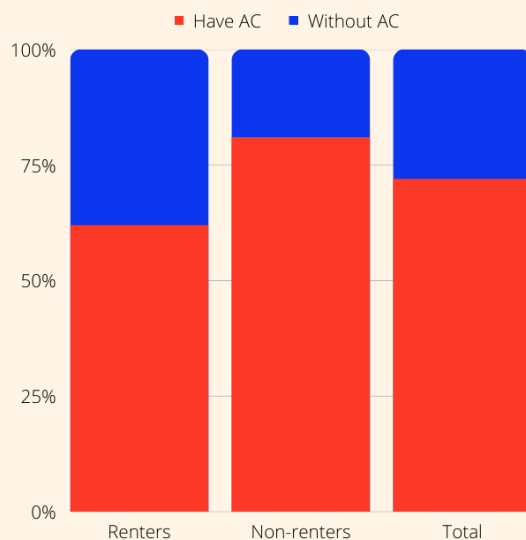


"It feels hopeless asking for insulation because the owners haven't spent any money on the house to make it liveable. Landlords don't think about what it would be like to live in an uninsulated house with a tin roof with no air con that gets hit with hot afternoon sun. I don't think they could live through a summer in this place."

"I feel powerless as a renter to ask for better living conditions, because I can't afford another rent increase. Regardless, I think it is unacceptable for landlords to be selling accommodation in houses that are unsuitable for living 3 months of the year." - Qld

2022 Summer Survey Report

- 38% of renter respondents are living without air conditioning, compared to 19% of non-renter respondents.
- 47.3% of renter respondents left their homes to find a cooler location compared to just 14.5% of people who said they own their home.
- 81% of non-renters reported having air conditioning compared to just 62% of renters.
- 72% of renters reported that concerns about costs stop them from turning on their air conditioner compared to 55% of non-renters.



Number of renters compared to non-renters with air conditioning in their homes

"I offered to buy and pay for installation of a ceiling fan in my rental which was refused by the landlord. We have three portable ACs (from Aldi) for each room on the eastern side as it gets so hot, even with the blinds drawn; easily 28° if it's above 25° outside. We don't have fly screens or security grills so we cannot leave the sliding doors open overnight to cool down. Every townhouse that's owner occupied has AC because it's unbearable without it; before COVID my partner would work from the food court in a shopping mall when it was hot." - NSW

"Landlords should be legally obligated to implement cooling features in older houses. I've literally had heatstroke, and I've sat outside at 10 at night because even at 40° outside it was cooler than inside. Tinting windows is cheap, so is providing curtain rails so a tenant can hang UV block out curtains to cover Venetian blinds." - NSW